

Acceding to Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr.'s requests, Metra today agreed to seek federal funding this year to build a new \$500-million commuter rail line from Chicago's South Loop to the south suburbs.

Metra also agreed to include the south suburbs in plans for a proposed suburban-to-suburban outer loop service, Jackson said. Finally, Metra pledged to rebuild six dilapidated Metra stations in Chicago's South Shore and South Chicago neighborhoods.

"I am overjoyed, thankful and extremely grateful for Metra's change of heart," Jackson said. "This is a monumental day for equity and improved service in our regional mass transit network.

"It's a major victory for the south region and I want to thank the Daily Southtown, the newly formed Southland Caucus, local mayors, and my colleagues in the Illinois Congressional delegation -- and particularly Congressman Lipinski -- for their unwavering support. There's much work ahead, but we have enough people on board for this train to start rolling forward," said Jackson, who has been seeking funds for this line for seven years.

Representing the Southland Legislative Caucus, State Senator Debbie Halvorson agreed. "This is why we formed a Southland Caucus -- to work with our mayors and our congressman to promote the greater good of the region and its residents. Good things can happen when we stand united."

Olympia Fields Mayor Linzey Jones, president of the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association, said: "The Southeast Service will provide much needed access from our region to LaSalle Street and the South Loop. This access to white-collar jobs in the financial district will provide an economic boost to our communities and our residents."

"This is a wonderful example of how regional cooperation can add future vitality to the Southland," Jones said.

At today's board meeting, Metra announced it would request \$500 million in federal funds for planning, engineering and construction of the Southeast Service. The line would run from the LaSalle Street station in Chicago's South Loop area to Crete, with proposed stops in Dolton, South Holland, Thornton/Glenwood, Chicago Heights and Steger.

Metra initially will seek up to \$75 million for design and engineering, which could take three years to complete. It would then request money for construction and purchasing new trains, though that is likely four or five years away, Jackson said.

Metra also announced it would seek \$1.1 billion for planning and construction of its first suburban-to-suburban service. Known as the STAR line, the first phase of the outer loop would run from O'Hare through the northwest suburbs to Elgin, and then due south through Aurora, Naperville and Joliet -- intersecting other Metra trains at each city.

While Metra recently announced the STAR line would exclude south suburbs east of Joliet, Metra reversed itself today and announced all future STAR studies would include the south suburbs.

"I praised Metra for re-including the Southland in the STAR line," Jackson said. "Southland residents endure some of the longest commutes in the nation, and many are reliant on mass transit. These two lines will provide area residents with job access to Chicago and the suburbs."

Metra will seek the money for both projects through the Transportation Equity Act (TEA-3) bill that comes before Congress this year. All TEA projects will require local matching funds, including contributions from the state and local municipalities. Several communities have already agreed to pay for their own station and parking lots along these new lines.